DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 236 681 CS 207 957

AUTHOR Strobel, Shirley H.
TITLE Teaching Conceptualization through Narrative Analysis: A Formula for Theme.
PUB DATE Nov 82
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English (72nd, Washington, DC, November 19-24, 1982).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Conflict; Discovery Learning; *Discussion (Teaching Technique); English Instruction; Grade 11; High Schools; *Learning Processes; *Literary Criticism; *Literature Appreciation; Models; Teaching Methods
IDENTIFIERS *Conflict Analysis; *Heuristics; Miller (Arthur); Steinbeck (John); Thematic Analysis

ABSTRACT

A five-step method of conflict analysis can help students generate accurate and complex theme statements about literature without teacher intervention. The conflict analysis involves (1) identifying the characters who are in conflict as a series of pairs and determining if the protagonist has an inner conflict; (2) determining the major conflict, which is found at the center of the narrative's climax or turning point; (3) identifying each conflict between characters in terms of the ideas they represent, creating paired opposites of abstractions such as selfish and unselfish; (4) analyzing the conflict's resolution to determine which of the opposing forces is stronger; and (5) deciding why the dominant force wins out or why there is no resolution. The answer to this last question is the theme statement. Conflict analyses of John Steinbeck's short story, "Flight," and Arthur Miller's play, "Death of a Salesman," show how this procedure can be used effectively with different literary genres. (MM)

**********
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
**********

ED236681

# Teaching Conceptualization through Narrative Analysis: A Formula for Theme

Shirley H. Strobel

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☒ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Shirley H. Strobel

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

CS 207957

Teaching Conceptualization through Narrative Analysis:

A Formula for Theme

We English teachers have discovered that a fine strategy for the teaching of the process of thinking is asking our students to write a theme statement for a narrative. The process of pulling together all the elements of a short story or play into its essential unity, as demonstrated by a statement of its theme, taxes the highest skills of critical thinking, those of both analysis and synthesis. This process of arriving at a statement of theme for a narrative seems so elusive for even our most gifted students that we have wished for a simple teaching procedure. Over the years of working with gifted juniors in a short story course, I have evolved a method for conflict analysis which generates a theme statement. Armed with this method, students can consistently produce, without teacher intervention, accurate and complex statements that go to the core of the narrative they are analyzing. This method consists of five steps, which can be reduced to a simple algebraic formula.

This approach assumes that the way in which an author does or does not resolve plot conflict in his narrative is the clearest indication of theme. Even in narratives where the conflict is not resolved but only revealed, theme grows out of the reader's understanding of why the conflict was not resolved. The basic question of analysis for conflict that is resolved is "What happens to resolve the conflict and why does it happen?" or, in its negative form for narrative where conflict is revealed only but not resolved, "Why didn't anything happen to resolve the conflict?"

The analysis begins by identifying the two opposing forces that are in conflict, defined as the protagonist and the antagon-

ist, and showing how all other plot elements are related to these two forces. Often an exterior conflict encountered by the protagonist is mirrored by an interior conflict he experiences. In addition, minor characters usually repeat the major conflict in one of its several forms. Thus, the many aspects of a narrative can be seen to coalesce around the rubric of the two opposing forces of the plot conflict, appearing as specific characters in the narrative, and the underlying abstract ideas they represent.

To set up our literary equation, we let

R = reason conflict was (or was not) resolved

T = theme statement

A,B = two forces in conflict (protagonist, antagonist).

The literary premise defines the equation that relates A,B and R to arrive at T: If one force dominates (creating resolution of the conflict), the reason for its domination produces a theme statement. The equation expressing this idea takes the form:

(a) $A > B \rightarrow R = T$, i.e.,

when force A is stronger than force B (leading to resolution of the conflict in A's favor), the reason for A's domination produces a theme statement. When force B is stronger, the formula is:

(b) $B > A \rightarrow R = T$.

A second premise is: When the forces are nearly balanced ($\approx$), (leading to a revelation but no resolution of the conflict), the reason why neither force is stronger leads to a theme statement, and we have:

(c) $A \approx B \rightarrow R = T$.

Students apply this formula to narratives with greater or lesser success, depending upon a) the validity with which they identify conflicting forces and the abstract ideas they represent, and b) the rich complexity of associations they can correctly

apply to each of the opposing forces. To aid them in this process, I have outlined five steps to arrive at a statement of theme.

Step 1: Identify the characters who are in conflict, as a series of pairs, character Vs. character. List any character who is in conflict with any other character in the narrative, since the minor conflicts will either parallel the central conflict or else show some other aspect of the central conflict. Carefully examine the protagonist to determine whether or not he has an inner conflict; if so, list protagonist Vs. protagonist.

Step 2: Identify the major conflict, an important step because the theme statement must center on this conflict. Designate only one external conflict as "major," though you may find it repeated as an internal conflict within the protagonist. The major conflict is found at the center of the narrative's climax or turning point; it is the conflict that is resolved in narratives of resolution and the conflict that is revealed in narratives of revelation.

Step 3: Identify <u>each</u> conflict between characters in terms of the ideas they represent as paired opposites of abstractions, i.e., selfish Vs. unselfish or life Vs. death. Do not be satisfied with one pairing of abstractions: a full listing of all aspects of a protagonist's characterization which are echoed in character parallels or contrasted in character foils will result in a richer statement of theme. It is very important in listing abstract ideas to keep all ideas that are <u>negative</u> on one side and those that are <u>positive</u> on the other. In this manner you clarify the unifying structure of the narrative that draws all conflicts and characters into the conflicting relationship

between the two opposing forces, the protagonist and the antagonist.

Step 4: Analyze the resolution of the conflict to determine which of the opposing forces of the conflict proves stronger. Write out in several sentences what the resolution is or what the unresolved conflict is.

Step 5: Determine why the dominant force wins out or why there is no resolution. The answer to this question is the theme statement.

The accompanying chart demonstrates the process as it is applied to a short story, "Flight" by John Steinbeck, and a play, Death of a Salesman, by Arthur Miller. The answers given by the are suggestive only, indicative of the kinds of answers that do produce acceptable theme statements. However, each class that analyzes conflict in a particular narrative produces its own set of abstract ideas, and each person, his own version of a theme statement. The best lists of abstract ideas are generally the most inclusive, as long as each pair of opposites can be substantiated by events or details from the narrative.

It may be helpful to review the events of Steinbeck's "Flight" before we apply the step-by-step process to the narrative conflict. "Flight" is the story of 19-year-old Pepé Torres, the lazy, irresponsible eldest son in a fatherless family, whose flight through the mountains while being pursued by officers of the law changes him from a boy into a man.

At home Pepé spends his time practicing throwing his father's big black knife, while his mother berates him for his lack of responsibility about the farm. Mama sends him to Monterey to

get medicine for the family. As he leaves, dressed for this important occasion in his father's clothes, his mother notes, "A boy becomes a man when a man is needed." While he is in Monterey, he is called insulting names by a man he does not know. His instinctive response is to throw his knife--the man is killed and Pepé must flee from the police. Mama helps him gather his gear together for his flight into the mountains, saying, "Pepé is a man now. He has a man's thing to do."

During his flight, Pepé takes precautions to save himself: he hides from a passerby on the trail, he rations his water, he pushes on in spite of his utter weariness. But as the officers of the law draw closer to him, he makes mistakes: he loses his hat, his pack, and finally his gun. The officers from a distance shoot his horse and wound Pepé in his right hand. Finally as the police with their dogs close in upon him, Pepé realizes the hopelessness of his situation. Instead of running away helplessly, he deliberately stands upon a rock, making himself a target for his pursuers. Their first shot misses him, and Pepé pulls himself erect, waiting for the second. When that shot hits him, his dead body rolls down the mountain side.

The first step is to identify the conflicts, both external and internal. In this story the three external conflicts that Pepé faces are easily recognized by reference to his antagonists, i.e., Mama, the man who insults him in Monterey, and his pursuers on the trail. All of these antagonists ultimately challenge Pepé at the same point: to lay aside his irresponsible ways for the mature responsibility of manhood. Mama calls him "Peanut" and "Chicken," while the man in Monterey insults him, certainly in a manner that denies his manhood. The law enforcement officials

implicitly reiterate the demand that Pepé take responsibility for his action, i.e., the act of killing his tormentor. These external conflicts are mirrored in the internal conflict within Pepé. He wants to be a man, as he proudly wears the clothes of his dead father when he goes to buy medicine for the whole family; he instinctively flicks out his knife and kills the man who suggests he is less than a man. Although he is lazy and irresponsible about the farm, a part of Pepé wants very badly to become the strong, diligent, courageous man his mother wants him to be. Thus, because of the unity underlying the three different forces arrayed as antagonists against Pepé, they become one force, exerting the same kind of pressure on Pepé to grow up, as shown schematically in steps 1 through 3 on the chart.

The resolution of "Flight" is in doubt until the very end of the story. Pepé continues to vascilate between childishness and maturity as he flees from his pursuers. He cannot be called "lazy" during his flight, certainly--he is much too scared. However, he does show traces of his childish irresponsibility when he loses his hat, his pack, and even his gun. On the other hand, he is grown up enough to realize that he must conserve his water and he must hide himself from the passerby on the trail. The question of which of the two tendencies within Pepé emerges stronger is answered only when Pepé awaits the arrival of the law officials and their dogs. He realizes that he cannot survive without his horse, without food, and in his wounded condition. What shall he do? He could scramble off into the buases and cower there like the "Chicken" Mama says he is. At this point, Pepé becomes a man: he courageously chooses to die with dignity. He pulls himself into a standing position on top of a rock, making himself a

target for his pursuers. After the first bullet misses him, he must again pull himself erect to wait for the second try. Thus, side B, manhood, proves stronger than boyhood for Pepé.

The theme statement now grows out of the answer to the question: why does Pepé act like a man in the moments before his death? The answer is rather bare: he has no other alternative that is better. Running away hopelessly accomplishes nothing; facing death courageously gives him the satisfaction of becoming what he has wanted to be from the beginning, a real man. Thus the theme statement emerges: A boy can shed his irresponsibility and grow up quickly if the situation he faces gives him no other acceptable alternative.

When students have independently worked through the five steps of this process and arrived at their own statement of theme, they are absolutely delighted with themselves. They can get to the heart of a narrative without help from the teacher. My juniors spend a semester applying the theme development process to short stories. First, I modeled the approach and then led the class to apply it to stories grouped according to plot complexity, characterization, symbolism and point of view. Then students worked in pairs to apply the method to a new story, with each pair working on a different story. The pairs presented a complete analysis of their story to the whole class (who had also read that story) for a critique of their work.

What fun it is to listen to a class involved in intense debate over a literary interpretation, which has grown out of ideas generated completely by them! The analysis-for-theme approach allows a teacher to set the stage and retire to the rear of the classroom, while the bright young minds take over.

CHART APPLYING ANALYSIS-FOR-THEME APPROACH TO STORY AND PLAY

| | "Flight" | | | Death of a Salesman | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Step 1: Characters in Conflict | Pepé | Vs. | Pepé | Willie | Vs. | Biff |
| | Pepé | Vs. | Pursuers | Biff | Vs. | Biff |
| | Pepé | Vs. | Mama | Willie | Vs. | American Business |
| | *Man | Vs. | Pepé | Happy | Vs. | Biff |
| | | | | Biff | Vs. | Howard |
| | | | | Willie | Vs. | Charlie |
| | | | | Biff | Vs. | Bernard |
| | | | | Woman | Vs. | Linda |
| | | | | Ben | Vs. | Linda |
| | | | | Ben | Vs. | Charlie |
| | *who insults Pepé | | | | | |
| Step 2: Major Conflict | Major external conflict: Pepé Vs. Pursuers | | | Major external conflict: Willie Vs. Biff | | |
| | Internal conflict: Pepé Vs. Pepé | | | Internal conflict: Biff Vs. Biff | | |
| | A | | B | A | | B |
| Step 3: Abstract Ideas in Conflict | Irresponsibility | Vs. | Responsibility | Dream | Vs. | Reality |
| | Boyhood | Vs. | Manhood | Phoniness | Vs. | Authenticity |
| | Laziness | Vs. | Diligence | Loss of effectiveness | Vs. | Demand for profits |
| | Cowardice | Vs. | Courage | Shame | Vs. | Dignity |
| | | | | Dishonesty | Vs. | Honesty |
| | | | | Being well liked | Vs. | Hard worker |
| | | | | Talk | Vs. | Act |
| | | | | Irresponsibility | Vs. | Responsibility |
| | | | | Self-delusion | Vs. | Self-awareness |
| | | | | Failure | Vs. | Success |
| | | | | Past | Vs. | Present |
| | | | | Deception | Vs. | Integrity |
| Step 4: Resolution | B wins. After showing both irresponsibility (loses hat, pack, gun) and responsibility (hides, saves water), Pepé realizes he cannot survive and courageously makes himself a target for his pursuers. The responsible and courageous side of Pepé wins in his death; he "becomes a man when a man is needed," as he courageously chooses to die with dignity. | | | For Biff B wins. For Willy A wins, though he dies to gain B. Biff unsuccessfully tries to get Willy to recognize that he (Biff) is a failure because he has adopted Willy's values that allow him to steal whatever he needs to "succeed." Willy sees only that his response is important to Biff. He commits suicide to give Biff his insurance money. Thus Biff achieves self-awareness and responsibly comes to grips with reality, while Willy does not. | | |
| Step 5: Reason = Theme Statement | A boy can shed his irresponsibility and grow up quickly if the situation he faces gives him no other acceptable alternative. | | | If Willy is considered protagonist: A man who has built his life upon false values and a false perception of himself and his sons will be unable to drop his self delusions if it means losing his sense of personal dignity. If Biff is considered protagonist: If a son can see his father's failures and self delusions, he can face those same tendencies in himself and clear the way to build a future on a realistic base. | | |

Microfilmed From
Best Available Copy